Spring 2009

LOUISIANA Conservationist

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TURKEY MANAGEMENT
A Remarkable Success Story

Strong Storms, Harder Hunts
Hunting Pearl River WMA since Katrina

The Atchafalaya Basin

OUTDOOR ROOTS
Sherburne South Farm: a bird paradise in the heartland

Dedicated to the conservation and restoration of Louisiana's natural resources. Published by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Robert Barham, Secretary

Comments

In my first column as secretary in the Spring 2008 *Louisiana Conservationist*, I addressed the issue of funding for the Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries. That issue remains a priority, as it will for those who will hold this position in the future.

All state agencies are facing budget cuts due to revenue shortfalls that have forced the administration to direct department administrators to make decisions on program priorities. This agency has not been immune from the process, even though state general funds are a small percentage of our annual budget. Each division head has brought forward cost savings suggestions that don't undermine the mission we serve.

Our basic tasks, habitat management for the continued health and growth of the state's fish and wildlife populations, licensing commercial and recreational users, and enforcement of the regulations that govern harvest of fish and game species, will not diminish relative to their importance.

The department has, in the current fiscal year, dramatically reduced staff travel out-of-state, new vehicle and watercraft purchases, and frozen positions as directed by the Governor. Looking ahead to fiscal year 2009-10, we are prepared to make cuts in road maintenance expenditures within wildlife management areas (WMAs), if necessary. To minimize the impact on WMA users, a corresponding loosening of restrictions on the use of utility vehicles would be implemented.

Wildlife and Fisheries' responsibilities have evolved over the years and natural disaster response, specifically hurricane response, now consumes many hours of personnel time. This was especially true during the storms of 2005 and again in 2008. The search and rescue duties assigned to the Enforcement Division and federal recovery fund distribution assigned to the Office of Fisheries are major assignments the department accepted and will continue to oversee. The federal funding which reimburses the agency for time expended on these projects covers most of the cost, but the employee time spent to handle each task is lost on what would be normal seasonal activities for those staffers.

Be assured, our personnel will continue to respond to those challenges and the 21st century problems that are now part of the mission before us. These include working cooperatively with state and federal agencies on coastal restoration and protection projects that threaten fish and game habitat, and the human habitat just behind those first walls of defense against storm surge.

There's also the more focused response we now must devote to aquatic plant control in inland waterways around the state. The expanding growth of common and giant salvinia, as well as hydrilla and water hyacinth, cannot be ignored when municipal water supplies and property values are threatened, as well as fisheries habitat.

As I said a year ago, the broad scope of this agency's responsibilities is not completely new to me. I am now more aware of the depth of detail that comes with responding to those responsibilities. But I am fortunate to have a staff able and ready to propose and roll out solutions to each challenge that comes up next on the "to do" list – and in many instances before the challenge surfaces.

We will continue to work with the administration to resolve the fiscal problems that lie ahead and serve the state well in the process.

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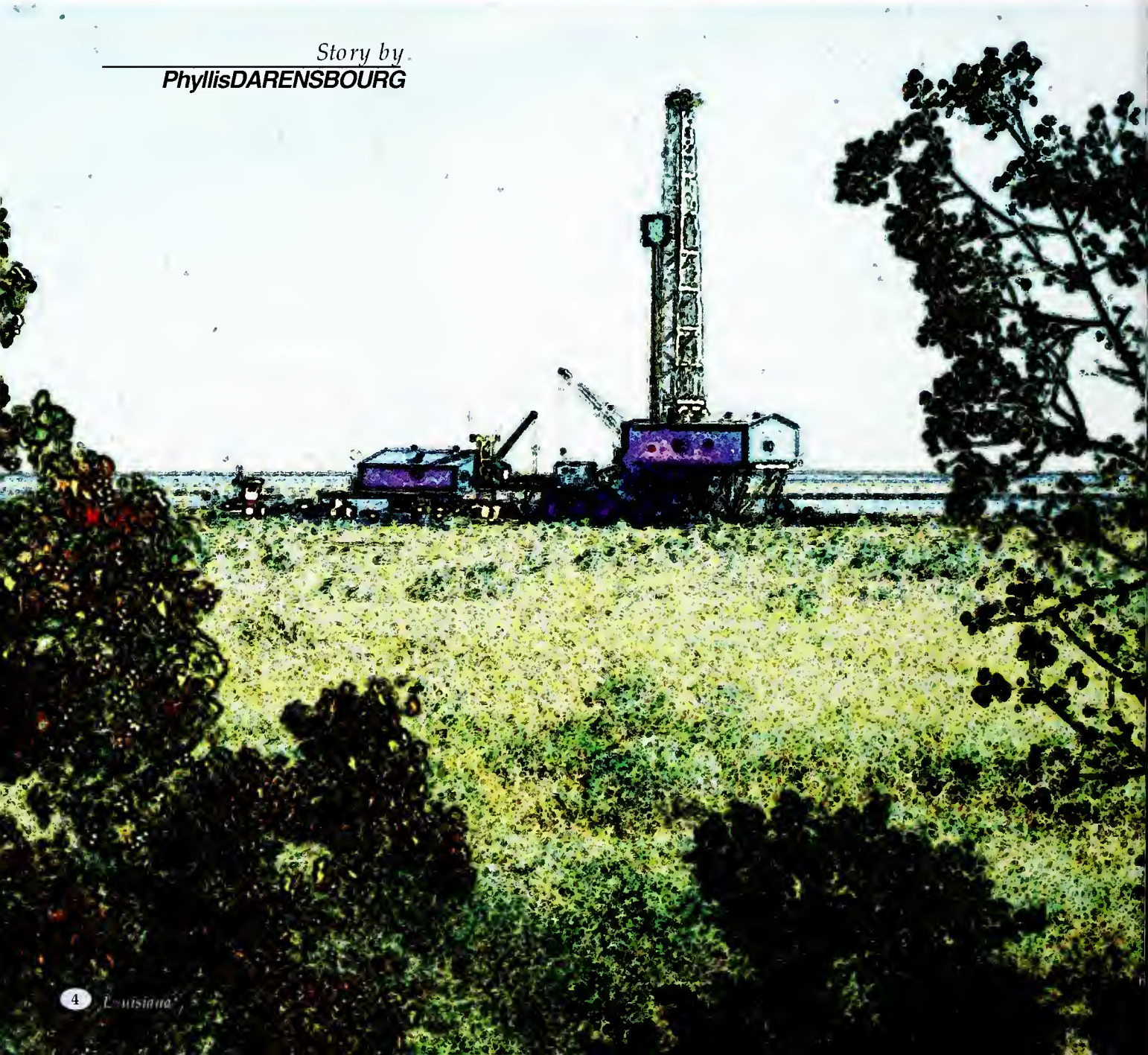
Louisiana's Oilfield

a return to green

Working to restore picture perfe

Story by
PhyllisDARENSBOURG



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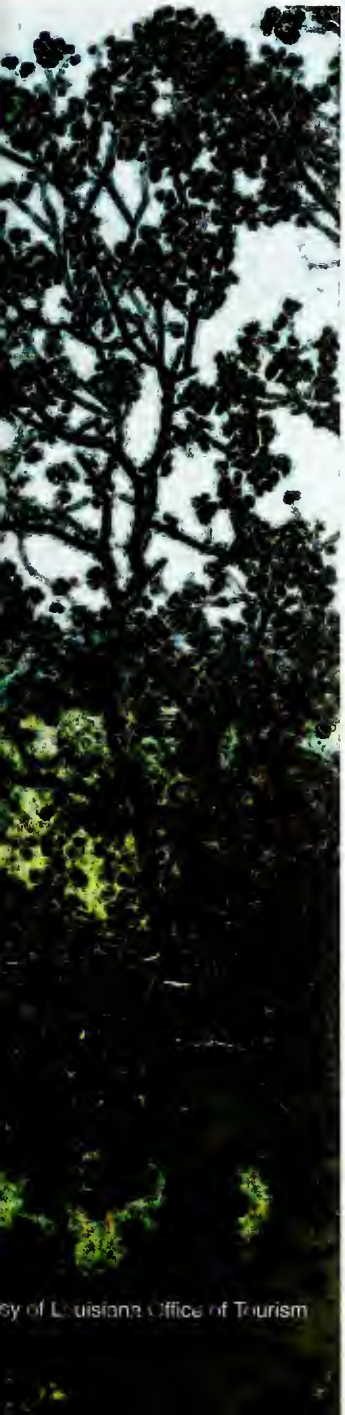


sy of Louisiana Office of Tourism

Sustaining our Sportsman's Paradise is a responsibility in which every Louisiana citizen, private and corporate alike, shares a role. State government agencies, such as the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) with its Rigs to Reefs program and the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources' (LDNR) Oilfield Site Restoration Program (OSRP), have an important role in stewardship as well.

OSRP is administered by LDNR's Office of Conservation under legislative Act 404 of 1993. The program was designed by lawmakers to assure proper closure of orphaned oil well fields all across the state, using money provided through fees paid by the oil and gas industry based on production. Orphaned wells are old and abandoned oil and gas wells for which no viable responsible parties can be located.

Back in 1993, legislators set their sights on lawfully addressing what was becoming a growing problem - vacant areas of land posing a health and safety risk to its citizens. At that time, the state's landscape was dotted with abandoned oilfields where productivity from mineral extraction had long ceased, yet harsh signs of decay and safety concerns were evident. Some of these sites were located in wildlife management areas (WMAs) like the Buckhorn WMA, Thistlewaite WMA and several others. The environmental picture included debris of all kinds, exposed old pipes, patches of black oil on the ground and rusting storage tanks.

Lawmakers crafted what became Act 404, knowing that good public policy required that these old sites be returned to their pre-drilling state. They understood what the future might hold if action wasn't taken to remediate the land. Moreover, they believed in a future where these borrowed fields could become productive green ones again.

LDNR Secretary Scott Angelle noted that the resulting legislation provided for the state to direct, prioritize and perform the restoration work, while industry would pay the bill through fees charged to the oil and gas companies based on their production. It was a doable process.

A snapshot view of Louisiana's oil and gas exploration history can be traced back to the 1800s when wells were drilled by hand. The first true commercial oil production began in 1901 in the Jennings oilfield near the coastal zone, followed by the Caddo field in north Louisiana in 1911. By the 1940s, oil and gas production began offshore. These resources that were developed in the early 1900s reached a peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and then a decline in the 1990s, leaving an increasing number of abandoned production fields. The LDNR Office of Conservation had its beginnings in 1912, when the Commission of Conservation was formed to administer oil and gas operations. Today, LDNR's Office of Conservation is responsible for administering the rules and regulations by which companies must abide for exploration, development and ultimately plugging and restoring oil and gas sites. The primary regulations pertaining to developing wells and preventing waste are found in Statewide Order 29-B, dating back to 1942.

In all, the oil and gas industry has drilled more than 208,000 wells in the state of Louisiana. Of those, about 4,800 have been identified as

Before and after pictures of a recently restored orphan well site in St. Landry Parish. There were 13 wells, six facilities and one pit removed at a cost of $492,100. The work was completed in August 2008, and the site continues to flourish today.

Photos courtesy of LDNR

orphaned and in need of cleanup. When the program started, about 2,200 wells were identified as orphaned, but the number increased as Oilfield Restoration staff continued their work of researching and having wells officially designated as orphaned. The bulk of the wells designated as orphaned pre-dated modern regulatory rules and business practices.

Since the inception of the program, $59 million has been spent on the plugging of 2,097 orphan wells along with the closing of 589 pits and the removal of 270 production facilities. In any given fiscal year, the Office of Conservation is responsible for restoring some 160 or more old oilfield sites in the state.

OSRP has plugged 23 orphaned wells located in national wildlife refuges and 52 well sites in state WMAs over that period of time.

LDWF manages over a million acres of public lands throughout the state. Hunters and fishermen know the pleasures of being in accord with the natural fauna and flora found in every corner of the state; north, south, east or west.

In the Buckhorn WMA alone, 11 sites have been cleared by the program. Buckhorn is located in Tensas Parish, where hiking trails are popular, as well as birding. Game species found in this WMA include white-tailed deer, rabbits and squirrels. Deer hunters and trappers have a deep appreciation for the habitat and the bounty found here.

"This program has been one of the great successes for our state. While LDNR provides direction in locating, prioritizing and doing the work on these sites, it is industry that is paying the bill through fees charged to oil and gas companies based on their production," Angelle said.

How the OSRP Works

The state treasury collects fees quarterly for the OSRP fund from oil and gas operators and companies based on the amount of production. The fee consists of

Photos courtesy of LDNR

Oilfield Site Restoration projects are located all across the state. Shown here, a before and an after view of a field located in Acadia Parish at Bayou Nezpique. The site was restored within a four-month period in 2008.

1.5 cents for every barrel of oil and condensate produced, and three-tenths of one cent for every thousand cubic feet of gas produced. The program must make use of the funds because the fee can be suspended should the account reach the $10 million cap. When the balance falls below $6 million, the fee is once again collected.

As an example of expenditures, in fiscal year 07-08, 166 wells were plugged at a cost of approximately $2.6 million, averaging about $15,900 cost per well.

In addition to the fee schedule based on production for the oil and gas industry as a whole, state law dating back to 1993 and Office of Conservation regulations dating to 2000 also provide for site-specific trust funds to be set up in instances where wells and fields change ownership or operators who have not done business in the state before acquiring wells or fields. Those site-specific trust funds prevent operators from walking away from cleanup responsibilities without leaving the funding necessary to restore the site.

It has always been the goal of the program to eliminate the threat of pollution posed by inactive unplugged wells and to minimize the number of orphan wells requiring plugging with monies from the fund. LDNR is authorized to seek the recovery of expenses from any responsible party or company that has operated at the site when restoration costs exceed $250,000.

The OSRP commission, which evaluates and approves contractors, selected to clean-up the old sites so that remediation is done to near pre-well conditions. The Office of Conservation staff prepares a bid package under the rules of the state bid law, then approved contractors make their bids. The lowest qualified bidder can be awarded the project if they meet all the administrative and technical requirements. In addition to the OSRP, there are a few other agencies that are involved in oilfield site clean-up and remediation in the state, including the Louisiana Oil Spill Office, the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

What may ultimately speak louder than words about the program is seeing the completed restoration work at these sites. From oilfields to green fields, the results are industry, development and environment coming together in a very positive way.

Phyllis F. Darensbourg is the Public Information Director for the state Department of Natural Resources. She has worked in the public affairs field in local and state government since 1980. She has been recognized for her work by the Public Relations Society of America and the National Association of Government Communicators.

Louisiana Swamps

The Atchafalaya Basin

Story by
KimLEVY-MARCELLE

Louisiana - an enchanted place with beautiful sand beaches and snowcapped mountains, diamonds, rubies and emeralds.

Doesn't sound like the Louisiana we know, but during the colonization period, this is what French explorers were told to lure them to the once unfamiliar territory of Louisiana. Rather than rubies and mountains, settlers found themselves in the midst of mosquito-infested, alligator haven, swampland. This shockingly different landscape seemed useless, and throughout history, swamps were portrayed as a frightening no-man's land.

But to the contrary, swamps have shown their value by providing a habitat to a variety of unique fauna and flora, and protecting surrounding areas from flooding and erosion.

Despite initial perceptions about swamplands, many began to realize the agricultural benefits of its nutrient-enriched soils. Over time, swamps have been drained and cleared for agricultural and other human enterprise purposes.

At first glance, a swamp is reminiscent of an ecosystem "ghost town." The algae covered water seems as stagnant as a blue heron's body when eyeing its prey. And the sunlight that peers through the tops of the cypress trees to the bottom of a swamp's green covered water is perfect for any Stephen King horror novel. But under the algae-plagued water lies soil that is rich in nutrients recovered from river floodwater, which enriches the diets of the many diverse plant and animal life and other upland creatures that depend on food from swamps.

Photo courtesy of Patricia Faulkner

A place that was once feared is now no stranger to people. Eager nature photographers, wild-game hunters and, of course, swamp boat tours all make-up an intriguing presence in the swamps.

Louisiana is home to some of the most enchanting swamps throughout the nation. The Atchafalaya stands as the state's crown gem of swamps. Louisiana's Atchafalaya River Basin Swamp is the largest of all southern swamps and is home to a variety of species and plant life. The basin itself contains over one-half million acres of hardwood swamps. The Atchafalaya Swamp serves as a perfect example of how important swamps are to wildlife, natural habitats and the cultivation of community and culture.

Experiencing Wildlife on the Atchafalaya

Because of a swamp's unique habitat, there are many outdoor activities that nature lovers and hunters can enjoy. Ask any hunter, birder, sportsman or wildlife enthusiasts, the opportunities are vast and unique. For birders, the Atchafalaya is a great place for a chance at viewing over 300 species of migratory and resident birds, including a large variety of diving and wading birds such as herons, egrets and ospreys. The basin's wooded areas also provide an ideal habitat for wood ducks. Impressively, the basin is home to the nation's largest concentration of American woodcock.

Photo courtesy of Louisiana Dept.of Tourism

LDWF File Photo

Photo courtesy of Michael Seymour

Above: Tourists enjoy a swamp boat tour on the Atchafalaya River Basin.

Right: The raccoon and barred owl are some of the wildlife that can be seen in the Atchafalaya River Basin.

The Atchafalaya River Basin stretches across 14 parishes in south-central Louisiana.

Hunters can enjoy the vast number forest-dwelling mammals while on the Atchafalaya. Some of the most common animals include the gray and fox squirrels, red fox and opossum. Some of the commercially significant furbearers found in the Atchafalaya are the raccoon, nutria, beaver and river otter.

Don't forget your fishing pole when experiencing the Atchafalaya. With over 85 species of fish that dwell in the river basin swamp, it is no wonder sportfishing is popular throughout the area.

Estimates show that populations of different aquatic species can exceed 1,000 pounds per acre. Largemouth bass, crappie and bluegill are among the fish sought by sportsmen. From both a sport and commercial harvest standpoint, blue crabs, catfish, freshwater drum and crawfish are considered some of the most important. Alone, nearly 22 million pounds of crawfish are commercially harvested from the basin on an annual basis.

Managing the Atchafalaya

From a wildlife management standpoint, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) work together through a cooperative endeavor to help manage the public lands and build strong habitats that attract and help produce more wildlife.

Louisiana's Sherburne Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is located on the upper third of the Atchafalaya River Basin and covers over 11,780 acres. It was established by LDWF in 1983 to help preserve the wildlife habitat for native

Photo courtesy of Trisha M. Shears

Largemouth bass (top left), bluegill (bottom left) and crappie (right) are among the fish sought by sportsmen.

Photo courtesy of the USFWS

Photo courtesy of the USFWS

Opposite page: One of the most common hunts on the Atchafalaya is for white-tailed deer.

Photo courtesy of the US Department of Agriculture

and migratory wildlife and promote outdoor recreation opportunities including hunting, hiking, paddling and wildlife viewing.

The Atchafalaya National Refuge, established by USFWS, is adjacent to the Sherburne WMA and covers 15,220 acres of land. The refuge manages for endangered wildlife species such as the American bald eagle and Louisiana black bear. Under a cooperative multi-agency agreement, these public lands are managed by LDWF. USACE owns 50,000 acres of the Atchafalaya and, under the cooperative agreement, LDWF manages the Bayou Des Ourses area.

The refuge is a popular hunting spot for its migratory waterfowl and big game and upland species. One of the most common hunts for this area is for white-tailed deer. There are many features that make the refuge a great place to hunt, but perhaps one of the most noted is its accommodations for youth and disabled hunters.

The Atchafalaya hosts over 20,000 visitors and generates more than $2 million annually. From paddle boating to fishing, the Atchafalaya and other Louisiana swamps provide a cultural retreat for both tourists and Louisiana residents. Many of the activities are centered around a long history of bayou dwellers shaping a livelihood and growing an appreciation for their uniquely different environment.

Who would have ever thought the frightening no-man's land would be a place residents love to call home?

Kim Levy-Marcelle is the editor of the ***Louisiana Conservationist.***

Photo courtesy of Patricia Faulkner

Alligator gar sku
LDWF File P

For the Love of Gar

Story by
Mary SYRETT

While cruising near the Louisiana shore casting spinner baits, we occasionally see them. While flipping a lure into weed pockets in hopes of enticing a black bass, we see them. When trolling we encounter a school of them, their beaks surfacing occasionally for air. But we mainly ignore them. Sometimes we cast to these prolific creatures, trying to catch one. But since they are not considered a game fish, we eventually get bored and continue fishing for common sportsmen's favorites.

Louisiana waters, both fresh and salt, provide a natural aquarium for the state's most common, as well as more unusual, fish species. Some, like the mullet, migrate inward to bayous from the Gulf of Mexico. Others, such as bullhead catfish, live in the dark recesses of underwater caves, emerging at night to feed. Others, including the gar, closely resemble members of the pike family in both shape and fin placement.

The gar gets its common name from the old English word "gar," meaning spear, which describes its long, narrow and pointed jaw. It has many other common names on the same theme, including gorebill, hornfish, sea pike and needlefish. Gar is an unmistakable-appearing fish but not easily spotted as it typically lurks just below the water's surface, where it is superbly camouflaged against ripples by an elongated shape.

To call the gar a living fossil is no exaggeration. Like the sea lamprey, horseshoe crab and sturgeon, gar that are seen today in the backwaters of Louisiana rivers differ little from those that darted among the tree-trunk-size legs of dinosaurs wading through prehistoric swamps.

Ever since I was a child, living off Dalrymple Drive in Baton Rouge, I've been fascinated by this creature, which hasn't evolved much since the Miocene epoch. For years, I tried to catch one in a Louisiana bayou or the Atchafalaya Swamp, but struck out most every time.

Characteristics

One reason gars have survived so long is their ability to adjust to changing environments. They can exist in drying pools long after all other fish life has succumbed. A gar's air bladder is loaded with blood vessels, enabling it to serve partly as a lung so that the fish can live long periods without using the gills. In fact, gar can survive 24 hours out of water.

Female gar lay up to 11,000 eggs in several batches throughout the summer. The tiny eggs are about an inch in diameter, but have 60 to 80 sticky threads that attach themselves to seaweed, rocks or floating debris. They are tinged green, which makes them difficult to spot among seaweed, while the waving of seaweed fronds in the water helps keep the eggs well oxygenated.

After five weeks, the eggs hatch and the young fish emerge, with strong black and yellow pigments. The tiny gar can swim and feed actively at an early stage. At first they have short jaws, but these soon start to grow unevenly, so that juvenile gar end up with a lower jaw much longer than the upper. The upper jaw eventually grows to equal the lower as the fish matures. Gar can live for up to 20 years.

Do Gar Ever Attack People?

In southern gar country, you'll occasionally hear talk of "man-eating" gars and tales that this river or that lake holds

Spotted gar and skull.

to courtesy of the USFWS

a flesh-devouring monster "measuring at least 20-feet." An alligator gar does in fact have a face that would scare an alligator and put a crocodile to flight. He is the original hardhead, with a head plated in bone and a body possessing hard plates.

A gar being dragged into a boat on the end of a line by an angler can injure someone during the intense struggle to try and free itself. Old newspaper accounts do occasionally tell of unsubstantiated gar attacks; however, such attacks mostly occur when people dip their hands or feet in the water. In a 1942 journal article, E.W. Gudger, an ichthyologist working for the American Museum of Natural History, wrote, "All my attempts to verify an actual gar attack on a human resulted in failure." Gudger went on, "When hungry, a gar may grasp a hand or foot dipped in the water near him (or her). That the creature will deliberately stalk and attack a human being similar to the way a tiger has on occasion been known to do, simply doesn't happen."

Where to Find Gar in Louisiana

Inspect most any body of water in Louisiana, including the Atchafalaya (Henderson) Swamp and Lake Pontchartrain, north of New Orleans, and you're likely to see gar. Also, the Pearl River, which, of course, separates extreme southern Louisiana from Mississippi, has its fair share of gar. More than likely, gar are closer than you think when you're anywhere near Louisiana waterways.

Spring Bayou Wildlife Management Area (WMA), located in north-central Avoyelles Parish, contains 12,506 acres in the Red River backwater system and is owned by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF). General topography is low, poorly drained land, with numerous finger lakes and narrow ridges. About 40 percent is covered by water, with a myriad of bayous, bays, oxbows and sloughs. The area is drained by Little River.

Fishing in the Spring Bayou WMA can be excellent. Principal species

Left:
Reeling in a gar can be quite a challenge.

Right:
Gar can be caught in Louisiana waters using worms and a bobber.

LDWF File Photos

Photo by Mary Syrett

Though some people think otherwise, gar makes for a tasty meal.

caught include largemouth bass, panfish and catfish. Other species caught include buffalo, freshwater drum and gar. Additional information about the Spring Bayou WMA can be obtained from LDWF: 5652 Hwy. 182, Opelousas, LA 70570; 337-948-0255 or *www.wlf.louisiana.gov*.

Pass-a-Loutre WMA is located in southern Plaquemines Parish at the mouth of the Mississippi River, 10 miles south of Venice, La. and is accessible only by boat. The nearest public launches are in Venice. The WMA encompasses 115,000 watery acres.

There is excellent fishing in the freshwater areas, as well as the more saline waters. Freshwater species include bass, bream, catfish, crappie and gar, all of which can be caught in interior marsh ponds.

Many Louisiana anglers believe that gar, being popularly viewed as a "trash fish," are inedible. But gar are quite tasty and there are many recipes, including gar patties and grilled gar, that are considered bayou delicacies.

Gar once covered an area extending from Canada to South America, and only a century ago they were indigenous to half of North America. But since gar are valued in our society less than lab rats, they've been destroyed across much of the continent (especially alligator gar, the largest of the species, which today is found only in the Deep South). Within the last three decades, however, biologists and conservationists, along with government agencies, have been making efforts to study and protect this fish.

The next time you are out on the water fishing for bass, crappie, perch, catfish, etc. and see a gar, take advantage of the opportunity to fish for it. Gar can be exciting to catch. When you see this seemingly mean-looking creature high up in the air, trying to spit out a bait or lure, it is a thrilling sight. It may surprise you in an unexpected way and enhance your sport fishing experience. It did for me and today I enjoy going after gar anytime, anywhere.

Mary Syrett is a freelance outdoors writer from Baton Rouge, La.

Sherburne South Farm

A Bird Paradise in the Heartland of the Corridor

Story by
DavidMORELAND

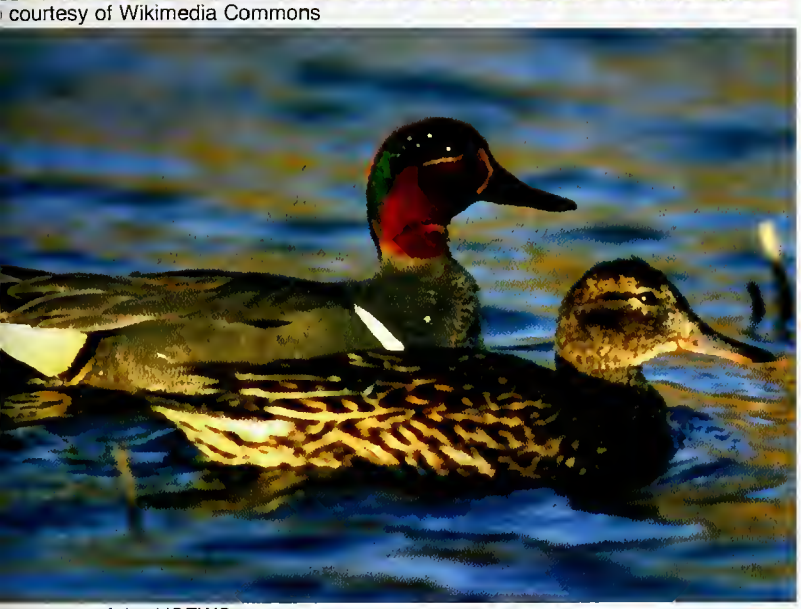
Travel across Louisiana on Interstates 10 and 12 (Louisiana's Corridor) and it is easy to see why this state is a paradise for birds. Honey Island Swamp, that land north and south of I-10 between the East and West Pearl Rivers, is the start of the corridor for westbound travelers. The journey ends at the Sabine River, some 240 miles west of the East Pearl. In between these two rivers that form the boundaries with Mississippi and Texas is habitat as diverse as the residents of this great state. Swamps, river forests, upland hardwood forests, longleaf pine forests, marshes, rice fields and prairies provide habitat for birds, along with fantastic birding for residents and visitors.

In the heartland of the corridor lies the great Atchafalaya Basin. The basin, 1.2 million acres in size, is promoted as the largest river swamp in the United States. While the basin provides outstanding hunting and fishing opportunities, it is also important for protecting south Louisiana from flooding by the Mississippi River. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) diverts water from the mighty Mississippi into the Atchafalaya River. The Atchafalaya River flows into the Gulf of Mexico at the Atchafalaya Delta Wildlife Management Area (WMA) where the river sediments are deposited onto the growing delta. This area in itself is a bird paradise, especially for waterfowl.

North of the delta at New Iberia is another bird paradise, Avery Island. No doubt all Louisiana residents are familiar with its famous pepper sauce factory. *Bird City*, written by E. A. McIlhenny and published in 1934, describes the bird paradise he built on the island. Dr. George Lowery, author of the book *Louisiana Birds*, notes that the efforts of Mr. McIlhenny were responsible for survival of the snowy egret.

The "bird paradise" in this story is located northeast of Avery Island, just

courtesy of Wikimedia Commons



courtesy of the USFWS

north of the corridor where I-10 begins to cross the Atchafalaya Basin. At this eastern location of the Sherburne WMA is a unique wetland area known as the South Farm Complex (exit I-10 at Ramah, #135, cross Bayou Maringouin and follow the levee northward to the South Farm sign). Sherburne WMA is a 44,000 acre tract of public land that actually has three names. Sherburne is the name for the 11,780 acres owned by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service owns 15,220 acres called the Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge. Bayou des Ourses Area (Bayou of the Bears) is the name for the 17,000 acres of land owned by USACE. All of these agencies work together through a cooperative agreement to manage the area as one tract, with the bulk of the on-the-ground management work being done by LDWF.

The main portion of Sherburne can be accessed a little further west of Ramah on I-10 at the Whiskey Bay Exit and then traveling north on Highway 975 (a gravel road). Travelers on US 190 can access the area by traveling south on Highway 975 along the levee (this exit is just east of Krotz Springs). Visitors to Sherburne will need to possess a Wild Louisiana Stamp, valid hunting license or a valid fishing license. Visitors also need to check-in and obtain a daily permit from a self-clearing station. These stations are located throughout the WMA and, upon leaving, a visitor is required to checkout and report their activity.

courtesy of the USFWS

Blue-winged teal (top), green-winged teal (center) and northern shoveler (bottom).

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Photos courtesy of USFWS

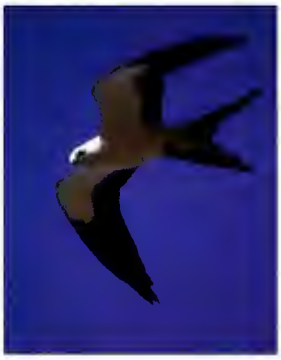


Photo courtesy of USFWS

Above:
White ibis (top left), swallow-tailed kite (bottom left), roseate spoonbill (top right), great blue heron (bottom right).

Opposite Page:
Wood stork (left), bald eagle (top right), snowy egret (bottom right).

The reason I refer to the South Farm Complex as a "bird paradise" is due its habitat diversity. A series of impoundments with levees that can be flooded in the fall and then drained in late spring were designed and constructed through a project agreement with Ducks Unlimited (which also provided funding for the project). Commonly called moist soil units, these drained impoundments promote the growth of various plant species that produce food for migrating waterfowl, shorebirds and water birds. When flooded, these impoundments provide habitat for fish, crawfish and other crustaceans that, in turn, serve as food for a host of shore and water birds. There are forested areas around the impoundments, both bottomland hardwood and cypress woods, that provide habitat for a host of resident and migratory songbirds. It is not often that such habitat diversity can be found at one location.

How good is the birding on the South Farm? In March of 2007, I drove to South Farm and met with the regional staff. When I exited off I-10 at Ramah, three swallow-tailed kites were gracefully sailing over the grassy areas around the interstate searching for prey (primarily snakes). These elegant birds of prey, with their distinct deeply forked tail, are often referred to as one of the signature birds of Sherburne. Recently, a research project was completed that examined their nesting habits on the area.

As I drove onto the area and was passing the first impoundment, I observed a bald eagle soaring around overhead. The eagle suddenly made a downward dive and landed in a grassy area out-of-sight. Eagles feed primarily on fish or carrion, and its power dive from the sky indicated he saw a delectable treat.

I then drove to the location of the pump that is used to flood the impoundments in the fall. Although the public is not allowed to drive vehicles onto the complex, there is a limestone road that's designed for ATVs and, of course, there are no restrictions on bicycles or hikers. There were still plenty of ducks flying around and feeding in the impoundments. I saw blue-winged teal, green-winged teal and northern shovelers. Herons, egrets, ibises and numerous shorebirds, one being my favorite shorebird, the black-necked stilt, were all around.

courtesy of USFWS

Photo courtesy of NASA

A few months later I was back at the South Farm to photograph what I consider to be another signature bird of Sherburne, the wood stork. The wood stork is a very large heron-like bird, much larger than all the other birds, except for the great blue heron, which is even larger than the wood stork. Its body feathers are white with various black-colored wing and tail feathers. It has a bald-head and a large heavy bill. While these birds are easily photographed from a distance with a big lens, I prefer to blind up on the edge of an impoundment before sunrise and enjoy the pageantry of flight and the socialization of all the birds as they fly in to feed.

At daybreak, the herons and egrets are the first to begin flying in. Several yellow-crowned night herons were already at the impoundment, and as the other birds flew in, they began to fly off to the forested areas. It is interesting to see just how wary and alert these birds are. Perhaps this is a result of the plume hunting days when these birds were fair game to hunters. From a distance one does not get to hear the various vocalizations of the different species as they contend for the best feeding areas. It is especially exciting when the wood storks start flying in and begin their feeding activity. Their loud croaking and the clacking of their heavy bills can only be appreciated up close. Wood storks feed with their bills open in the water, searching for crawfish. Occasionally, one will pick up a submerged limb, move it over and then search the exposed site for a crustacean.

Photo courtesy of USFWS

A few flocks of roseate spoonbills flew in adding more color to an already beautiful sunrise. Dr. Lowery calls these colorful birds the "Flame Bird" in his book. It is quite a spectacular sight to watch the different feeding habits of the various species in the impoundment. The herons and egrets are generally spearing and stabbing prey, the roseate spoonbills are sweeping their spoon-like bill side-to-side through the water and the huge storks have their heads down and heavy bills open as they wade through the water. The ibises feed similar to the storks, probing the bottom with their curved bills, while the cattle egret are on the grassy levees chasing and grabbing insects and an occasional field mouse.

In addition to birds, one has the opportunity to see and photograph a variety of animal species such as white-tailed deer, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons and nutria. On this morning, a group of river otters surprised me on my walk to the back. On another trip, a young coyote pup came out of an impoundment in search of the adult coyotes. My howling and barking caught the attention of the young pup and it came rather close to me. Alligators will sometimes move out of the adjacent canals and into the impoundments, feeding on the fish and animals such as nutria.

This bird paradise found on the South Farm is a great birding area in the state that is often overlooked, perhaps because WMAs are primarily thought of as areas for hunting. All WMAs are open year-round and provide opportunities for many outdoor activities other than just hunting. The South Farm Complex is an easy road trip thanks to the Interstate Corridor. For the past two years, a wood stork event has been held on a weekend in July, providing special opportunity for birders to see these large birds. Camping is available on Sherburne at the main headquarters area just south of US 190 on Highway 975. Visitors just need to abide by the license requirements and daily self-clearing permits. Further information about Sherburne and the South Farm Complex is available at LDWF's website, *www.wlf.louisiana.gov*. For even more information about Sherburne and the Atchafalaya Basin visit:

- *http://atchafalaya.fws.gov*
- *www.mvn.usace.army.mil*
- *www.louisianatravel.com*
- *www.atchafalayatrace.org*

There is an Atchafalaya Basin Welcome Center at the Butte La Rose exit (#121) off the I-10 Corridor just west of the Whiskey Bay exit.

David Moreland is a former biologist and administrator with LDWF. ***Outdoor Roots*** *is his regular column in* ***Louisiana Conservationist.***

Sunrise on the Sherburne South Farm.

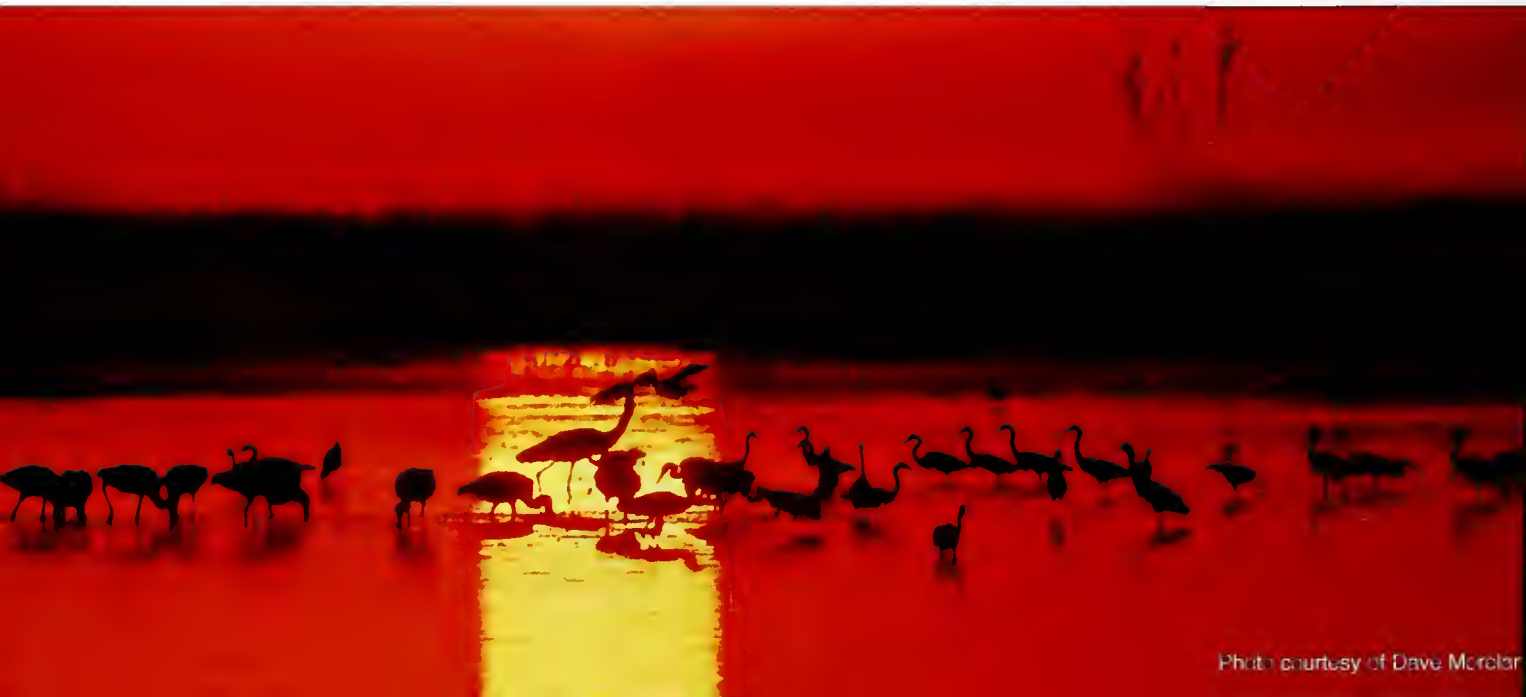


Photo courtesy of Dave Moreland

History Repeats Itself

Louisiana photographer, Fonville Winans, took the photo on the right in 1934. A Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) employee took the photo below in 2008. The significance of the two photographs is that the man in the 1934 photograph, Joseph Visier Boudreaux, is the maternal great grandfather of the man in the 2008 photograph, LDWF Fisheries Research and Assessment Division Administrator Joey Shepard.

Fonville Winans is famous for his black and white photographs illustrating Louisiana life. Most Louisianans recognize his photographs, if not his name, and the "Oyster Man" photograph is one of his more popular photos. "Oyster Man" was taken the day after Joseph's 50th wedding anniversary to Geolina Chighizola Boudreaux. Geolina was the granddaughter of Louis Chighizola (nicknamed "Nez Coupe"), one of Jean Lafitte's lieutenants. Joseph and Geolina celebrated their anniversary during the wedding mass of his granddaughter, Shepard's Aunt Olga Boudreaux. Nez Coupe later became a resident of Grand Isle after the pardon of the Battle of New Orleans.

Winans gave a copy of the photograph to Shepard's great grandfather and it has been passed down through the generations. LDWF is honored to have this historical genealogy in the department.

Photo courtesy of John Breerwood

Strong Storms Harder Hunts

Story by
JohnBREERWOOD

When hunting, the undergrowth in many areas of Honey Island Swamp has grown rampant, almost to the point of being impassible.

While growing up, I never thought hunting was easy, and maybe that's why I enjoyed it so much. There was always some challenge that made it exciting, whether it be the 87 degree unseasonable heat, angry deerflies or briar thorns relentlessly clinging to every fabric of my clothing. But today, those small challenges while hunting areas have changed beyond such mere inconveniences.

The Pearl River Wildlife Management Area (WMA), or Honey Island Swamp, was a retreat for me and my father. It was a place that we ventured to ever since I was old enough to

shoot a 4-10 shotgun. We started with squirrels and rabbits. And, naturally, as I became older, the gauges also grew. I began bagging wood ducks with an old, single shot 20-gauge and eventually graduated to big game and buckshot with a 12-gauge. As time passed, Honey Island Swamp remained the same. At least, that's how I remember it anyway.

Today, besides being difficult to reach, it is now impossible to enter portions of the Pearl River WMA. The eye of Hurricane Katrina passed directly over the entire Pearl River WMA in 2005, greatly affecting its ecology. Undergrowth was there before the storm, but at least the hardwood canopy kept it at bay. I remember once, we walked so far through the swamp that we came to the opposite parallel road. Now, the only possible straight line to reach either road may be via helicopter.

The lower part literally took the brunt of the storm and braced a 15-foot tidal surge, yet was not drastically altered. Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) biologist Jimmy Stafford says of the lower section, "Like roaches after a nuclear blast, we saw hog tracks just days after the storm surge receded." Some species didn't just survive but were bolstered by this sudden change. "Dozens of new ponds were gouged into the marsh actually improving waterfowl habitat," Stafford says. The midsection of the WMA remains almost unchanged as a result of the prevalent cypress and tupelo trees' ability to survive long floods and strong winds due to their strong base and aquatic root system.

However, the upper section wasn't so fortunate. Stafford says, "Some oak ridges were completely wiped out in wet areas, and drier areas saw 70 percent losses of hardwoods. Many small

Photo courtesy of John Breerwood

Above:
Fresh hog scat is a common sight among food plots.

oto courtesy of John Breerwood

When hunting food plots, position yourself near or along the access trails. Not only will you see approaching game, but also other hunters from a safe distance.

Photo courtesy of John Breerwood

LDWF File Photo

Above:
The scarcity of hardwood hurts the squirrel population, and the dense undergrowth is not conducive for wild turkeys that typically dwell in expansive, climax forests.

Below:
White-tailed deer, rabbits, hogs and wood ducks seem to have flourished in this environment.

streams and sloughs were blocked with trees altering the hydrology of certain sites."

When the hardwoods came down, the undergrowth came up with a vengeance. Once my dad and I tried to brave through the briars, but stopped after we only circled a 10-yard radius in over 30 minutes. That's part of the reason that the population of some game has boomed. Over the last two seasons, I came close to killing more rabbits, hogs and deer since I've been hunting there, but that's because I swerved my truck to miss them as they crossed the road. I have seen rabbits, hogs and deer cross the road, or strut along it as if they had no fear of predators. And as long as the thicket protects them, they'll have very few. Stafford says, "Experience has taught us that over-hunting is seldom an issue in thick post-hurricane habitat."

Not all species are flourishing in this new habitat though. The scarcity of hardwoods hurts the squirrel population, and the dense undergrowth is not conducive for wild turkeys that typically dwell in expansive, climax forests. Turkey season remains closed until the population rebounds.

You may be asking yourself, "But hurricane devastation to habitat isn't anything new, so shouldn't everything be back to normal one day?" Well, maybe. It depends on the invasive species that are taking full advantage by furthering their conquest in this swamp's volatile state. Salvinia and water hyacinth have proliferated since the storm, depleting the oxygen for the aquatic wildlife and obstructing boaters. The Chinese tallow tree, introduced from Asia for its decorative seasonal leaves, has been a major nuisance in the regeneration of the hardwood habitat. Its sap, leaves and seeds, are allegedly toxic, and most wildlife have the tendency to avoid it, which probably contributes to its proliferation. Stafford says, "The fast growing Chinese tallow has taken over many sites where a rich diversity of hardwoods once grew. Biologists expected the wildlife population responses that are now occurring, but many fear that short-term improvements in habitat will evolve into a long-term tree species composition shift toward more invasive plants less beneficial to wildlife."

LDWF File Photo

LDWF File Photo

LDWF File Photo

Photo courtesy of USFWS

Nevertheless, hunting in Honey Island Swamp will never be the same, for us anyway. Pearl River WMA supervisor Mark Bible says, "We'll never see it the same way in our lifetime. Some oak trees were 75 years old or more. Hunters will have to adapt." And, that's exactly what we have to do. You may have to forego your wood duck secret spot since your flagging is lost underneath the briars. Stafford says, "The extent of Katrina's devastation is so widespread that man cannot undo what nature has done. But, LDWF did salvage some 1,000 acres of downed timber, cleared miles of trails and food plots and herbicide-treated thousands of invasive species to assist the growth of native hardwoods."

So, now we must relearn how to hunt Honey Island Swamp. Other than walking the access trails, I have a few suggestions.

Hunt the sloughs. If you come across a slough that crosses the trail, jump off the trail and follow it. You may find mobility and visibility in parts of the unnavigable swamp even when it is bone-dry.

If there's water, then you've found a water source for big game and a possible landing area for wood ducks. If there's just sloppy mud, what better place to sit and wait for a hog? And believe me, it would be easier strapping on the waders and walking through water than fighting those vicious thorns.

Take advantage of food plots. Along certain trails, you'll come across open areas designated for sowing winter grass. If the grass hasn't grown, study it to see if the seedlings are just beginning to sprout. Fresh tire tracks suggest that the seeds need a little time to grow, so plan to return when the time is right. The grass provides an excellent food source for rabbits, hogs and deer. Rusty Vatty from the LSU AgCenter says, "The food plots initially are visited by big game, are more beneficial as they have ever been." In some areas, rabbit droppings are so widespread that you wonder if they've ever been hunted. I've frequently seen fresh hog mess all over these plots as well. But still wear your orange when hunting these plots. Since many of these plots are near the access trails, be very cautious of approaching hunters. If possible, position yourself where the trail meets the plot, so other hunters can see you at a distance.

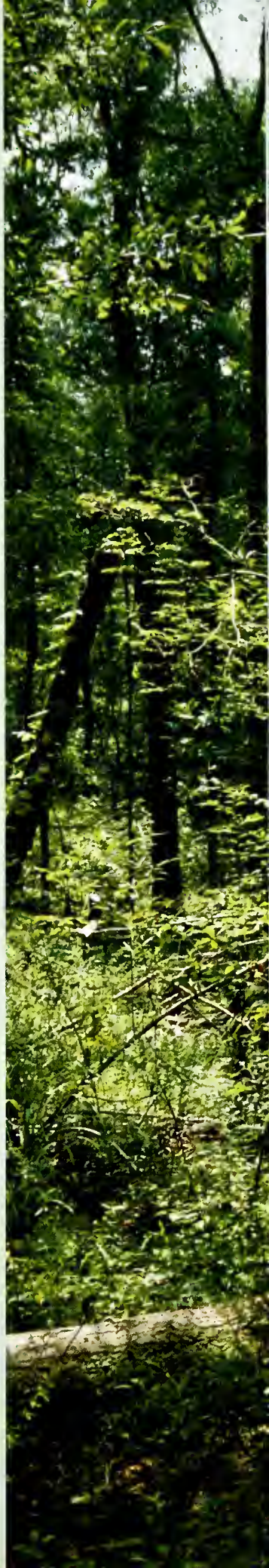
Find any nut-bearing tree that survived the storm. Finding the ground covered with acorns has never been more important. Rest assured that the hogs and deer have found these trees. I typically hunt at season's start and at season's end. I first came across a tree along the access trails, and its hickory-like nuts hadn't yet fallen. Later in the season, I returned to countless shells and caps amidst hog tracks and ruts. I have yet to hit this sweet spot when the hogs "pig out" (for lack of better words).

However, according to Bible, hunting in the Pearl River WMA has picked up. At the time of writing this article in late January, 69 deer had been harvested. "We are seeing an increase in hunters. There are lots of permits and overall use of the area. So people have adapted."

For anyone who has hunted there before Katrina, other hunters aren't anything new. Honey Island Swamp has always been heavily hunted due to its close proximity to urban areas like Slidell and New Orleans. Bible says, "It is a unique area with much diversity in salt and fresh water habitat. This is the place to go, especially if you live anywhere near the area."

So every season that passes, the game (specifically rabbits, hogs and deer) become more plentiful. Getting to them is the challenge. But as I said before, I appreciate a challenge. So, I only see the hunting getting better.

John Breerwood is an avid outdoorsman and enjoys outdoor writing. This is his first contribution to the ***Louisiana Conservationist****.*



LDWF File Photos

Turkey Management

a remarkable success story

Story by
JohnFELSHER

As the first hints of sunlight illuminate the verdant woods, experienced sportsmen frequently detect a turkey gobble among the woodland cacophony of chirps, screeches, cackles and cawing that welcomes each new spring day. Not long ago though, hearing a turkey gobble almost made the news in most of Louisiana.

"The return of wild turkeys, not just in Louisiana, but in the entire eastern half of the country, is truly one of the great wildlife management success stories," stressed Larry Savage, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) Turkey Program Coordinator. "Our turkey restoration program has ended. That's actually good because it's no longer needed. We have turkeys everywhere in Louisiana with good habitat."

Great flocks of wild turkeys once roosted in almost unbroken forests stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Plains and beyond. For three centuries, meaty turkeys remained so abundant that they comprised a steady source of protein for settlers moving ever westward. Before 1880, about 1 million eastern wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*), the most widely distributed and abundant of five subspecies native to North America, inhabited almost all of Louisiana north of the coastal marshes.

LDWF File Photos

Left:
LDWF biologist releasing a banded wild turkey (1960s).

Right:
LDWF employees unload boxed wild turkeys from a plane that flew them in from out of state. In the 1960s, LDWF imported birds from Mississippi, Texas, Florida, South Carolina and even Wisconsin in hopes of restoring the once plentiful turkey population.

Faced with such abundance, people shot them indiscriminately for food, believing such populations could never cease. Regrettably, their calculations proved dead wrong. Eventually, the turkey population plummeted as the human population increased.

Besides bullets, turkeys faced other hardship. In the early 20th century, timber companies chopped down virgin old growth forests and swamps to satisfy the lumber hunger of a growing nation. The prevailing "cut out and get out" philosophy of the time devastated thousands of acres of once-prime turkey habitat, leaving little more than scarred clear cuts.

Finally, sportsmen, worried that turkeys might disappear entirely from the few remaining forests, lobbied the state for restrictions and preservation laws. In 1902, Louisiana established its first turkey season, which ran from Nov. 1 - Mar. 31 with no bag limit or other restrictions. Three years later, Louisiana mandated a daily limit of 25 gobblers. Populations continued to decline rapidly.

In 1933, the state banned turkey hunting entirely, but many people ignored weak or unenforced game laws. Habitat destruction continued unabated. By 1946, only 1,463 birds lived in isolated pockets of the Florida Parishes and canebrake clusters along the Mississippi and Tensas rivers where President Theodore Roosevelt hunted black bears just three decades previously. Turkeys appeared ready to join the passenger pigeon until the state took action to save the bird that Benjamin Franklin wanted to make the national symbol.

"Initially we tried releasing pen-raised turkeys, but anything tame enough to stay in a pen will not survive in the wild," Savage said. "That program actually delayed the recovery and cost a lot of money. In 1962, we started live-trapping wild birds and releasing them in suitable habitat. With good habitat, the birds did the rest."

Over the next two decades, LDWF teams captured and released more than 3,800 wild birds. Most came from Louisiana, but the state also imported birds from Mississippi, Texas, Florida, South Carolina and even Wisconsin. During the same period, new hunting regulations took effect. Moreover, in the 1970s, people grew more aware of the need to preserve the environment.

Slowly, the turkey population rebounded. By 1970, hunters once again heard the melodious gobble of wild turkeys in 26 parishes. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the state conducted the second restocking phase, releasing turkeys in selected areas. In 2003 and 2004, the

state released 15 birds in Pointe Coupee Parish and 20 in Assumption Parish. The last release of wild turkeys occurred in February 2007 on Camp Minden, a 13,000-acre National Guard tract that once contained an Army ammunition plant. Today, about 80,000 turkeys thrive in almost all suitable habitat in Louisiana.

"Our key emphasis now is on harvest management and long term habitat management," Savage explained. "Turkeys can survive in a variety of different habitats. Where they find suitable habitat, birds do very well. Even if we put birds in places with poor or marginal turkey habitat, they won't thrive."

Although the bottomland along the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers offer birds some of the best habitat in Louisiana, hunters might see fewer turkeys in those areas this spring. High water last spring hurt nesting production. Sportsmen might instead shift their focus to the longleaf pine savannahs of southwestern Louisiana.

"The Mississippi and Atchafalaya river bottoms have high productivity due to the fertile soil and excellent habitat, but those areas had the lowest poult production we've ever recorded last year. Before that, we had good hatches, so sportsmen might bag some older birds, but I wouldn't expect to see many jakes this spring. Southwestern Louisiana had some really good hatches in the past several years. In the loblolly-hardwood forests of northern Louisiana, bird populations have been increasing, but 2006 and 2007 were bad years for poults. On the other hand, 2008 was a good year, so expect to see a lot of jakes with better hunting in 2010."

For hunting this year, Savage recommended Big Lake, Sherburne, Red River and Three Rivers wildlife management areas (WMAs). He also recommended Tensas National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Fort Polk. Fort Polk contains 105,545 acres near Leesville. The nearby Peason Ridge WMA offers another 33,480 acres. The U.S. Army uses both areas for extensive training, requiring sportsmen to request daily clearance from military officials.

"Fort Polk is always a good spot for turkeys, but access is limited due to the intensive training schedule of the Army," said John Robinette, an LDWF district game biologist in Lake Charles. "It has really good habitat, mostly rolling hills of mixed hardwood and pines with creek bottoms. Kisatchie National Forest is another good place to hunt turkeys."

Spread across seven parishes and divided into five managed units, Kisatchie National Forest contains about 604,000 acres of rolling hills covered in pine forests crisscrossed by creek bottoms lined with hardwoods. The Red Dirt area and the Winn Ranger District near Natchitoches typically offer excellent turkey hunting.

At the northern end of the largest riverbottom swamp in North America, Sherburne WMA, Atchafalaya NWR and the adjacent Bayou des Ourses U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lands combine

Below: In Louisiana, about 1,000 turkeys have been captured and banded since the 1980s, one of the largest banding projects of any state.

Left: Turkeys are captured by a large net launched near the ground.

Center: Turkey that has been netted.

Right: LDWF biologists band a turkey so it can be tracked.

o courtesy of Kevin Cole

Photo by John Felsher

Left:
A mother hen and her poults out for a stroll.

Right:
A hunter takes aim at a gobbler.

to form 43,618 acres of prime hardwood bottomland near Krotz Springs. The LDWF manages the entire tract as one public hunting unit.

The Florida Parishes, sanctuary of the surviving Louisiana flock decades ago, suffers from high population growth, of the human kind. Consequently, turkey production declined for more than a decade. Hurricane Katrina, smashing down most of the trees in the 35,032-acre Pearl River WMA near Slidell, once one of the best public turkey hunting areas in southeast Louisiana, didn't help matters. In addition, after the hurricane, many people relocated from lowland coastal parishes to the Florida Parishes, exacerbating the habitat problem.

"The biggest reason for the turkey decline in the Florida Parishes is the long-term loss of habitat due to human development in that region," Savage said. "Hurricanes have been hitting Louisiana for a long time. It generally takes about 10 to 15 years for a forest to recover from something like Katrina. As the trees grow back, the forest canopy becomes more dense and the understory opens, giving turkeys more room to move about. However, converting a forest into a subdivision is a permanent loss of habitat. When the habitat disappears, turkeys disappear and never come back."

Extreme northeastern Louisiana also suffers low turkey population densities in places due to poor or nonexistent habitat. Few birds live in West Carroll or large parts of Franklin, Ouachita, Richland and East Carroll parishes, where little good habitat remains.

To learn more about turkey harvests, LDWF biologists and others have banded about 1,000 turkeys since the 1980s, one of the largest banding projects of any state. That included 500 banded birds in the Florida parishes, more than 300 in southwest and north Louisiana and the rest in diverse parts of the state, Savage said. LDWF uses data provided by hunters who kill banded birds to help determine hunting seasons and bag limits.

"The era of turkey restoration is over," Savage emphasized. "We're now in the era of habitat and harvest management. We are trying to manage for a quality hunting experience. We want sportsmen to hear gobbling every time they go into the woods."

With proper management, Louisiana should offer abundant opportunities to harvest turkeys for many decades to come. For more on turkey hunting in Louisiana this season, see *www.wlf.louisiana.gov/hunting/seasons/turkey.*

John N. Felsher is a full-time freelance writer and photographer. He has worked for several newspapers and hosted his own radio and TV shows in Lake Charles, La.

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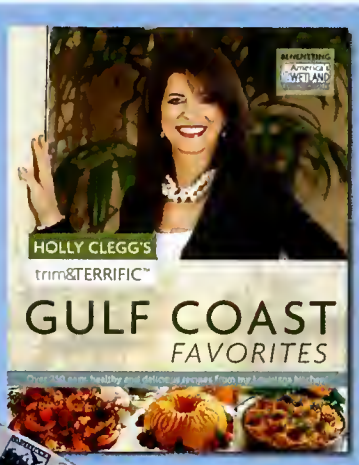

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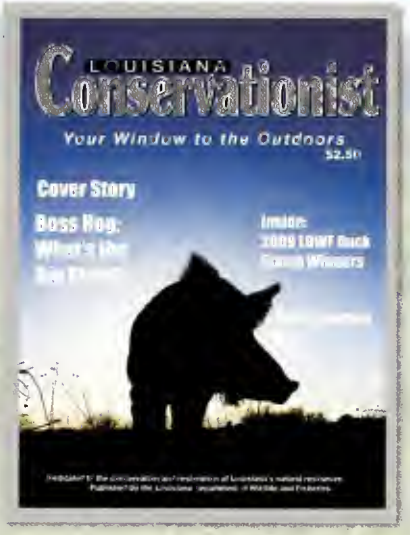

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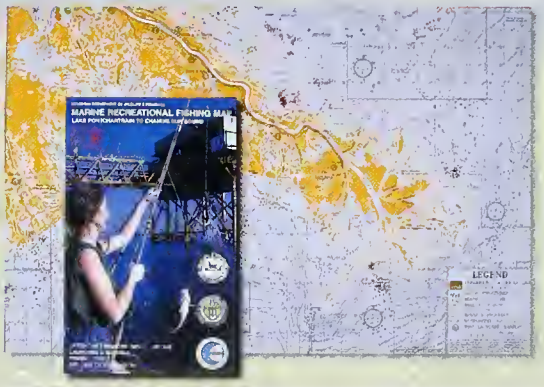

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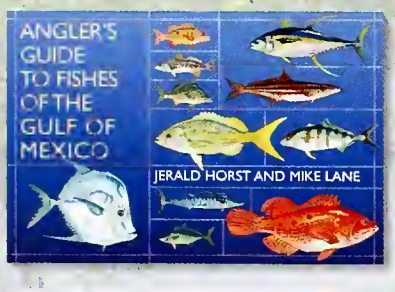

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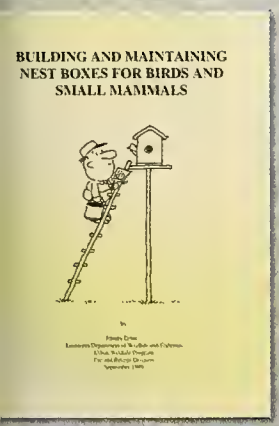

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Bayou Birding Bon Temps: Introduction to the Sport of Birding & the New Louisiana Birding Trails System

Louisiana has long been a favored destination for birders due to our state's incredible bird diversity. The number of bird species in our state rivals many of the larger states in the nation. With over 460 species of birds noted within our borders, including such rare gems as wild greater flamingo, jabiru and crowned slaty-flycatcher (the first on record north of Panama!), it is no wonder why even our most well-traveled, resident birders invariably jump at the chance to travel afield in our state. Recognizing the upswing in the popularity of birding, the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, in partnership with America's WETLAND and with the guidance of countless Louisiana bird experts, created the America's Wetland Birding Trail.

To promote the creation of this new trail system which traverses much of coastal Louisiana, the Louisiana Bird Resource Center based at LSU Museum of Natural Science in Baton Rouge has partnered with Baton Rouge Audubon Society, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, National Audubon Society, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and Louisiana Ornithological Society to host their first annual Bayou Birding Bon Temps from April 24 - May 3, 2009. The goals of the competition are to promote birding, the birding trails and wildlife management areas (WMAs) in Louisiana. To meet these goals, several categories are available for participation free of charge:

1) **Big Day** – the most bird species observed in a 24 hour period throughout various locations in the state.
2) **Big Sit** – the most bird species observed from within a 17-foot diameter circle of the entrant's choosing in a 24 hour period.
3) **Big Location** – the most bird species observed at a single location during the count period. Don't ignore WMAs; Sherburne, for example, contains one of the densest songbird populations anywhere in the US according to USGS Breeding Bird Survey data.
4) **Most Locations** – for the explorers, the most locations birded by an individual or team throughout the count period.
5) **Lagniappe Award** – a random bird species is picked, and all entrants who have seen that species are eligible for a prize drawing.

The state will be divided into regions (North Interior, South Interior and Coastal) to even the playing field, and winners from all brackets will receive prizes. But the rewards don't stop there. By participating in the competition, we will gain valuable insight into which private, federal and state lands are important to what bird species, a significant benefit from such an enjoyable event. Knowing what species are present in an area is the first logical step in their conservation.

For additional information, please contact Richard Gibbons, Louisiana Bird Resource Center Coordinator at rgibbo3@lsu.edu or visit: *http://appl003.lsu.edu/natsci/labirdweb.nsf/$Content/Bayou+Birding+Bon+Temps?OpenDocument*

Photos: Northern rough-winged swallow (left) and pine warbler (right)

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Kim Levy Marcelle,
Editor

Wheelchair-Bound Youth Hunter Nabs 240-Pound Buck on Sherburne WMA

An 8-point, 240 pound was no match for Brandon Soileau; a 14 year-old boy of Krotz Springs. Soileau scored the deer on the Sherburne Wildlife Management Area (WMA) on Nov. 28, 2008.

The caveat to Soileau's great feat is not only his age, but also that he was born with spina bifida and is paralyzed from the chest down. He has the use of his arms and hands though, which allows him to do two things he loves dearly in his life, hunting and fishing.

Brandon has been taking advantage of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' new physically challenged hunting opportunities on the Sherburne WMA the past two years. Since physically challenged permitted hunters are allowed a helper, his godfather Tim Bourque was with Brandon in the deer blind.

"When the buck got within about 100 yards my godfather told me to get ready to shoot," Brandon said. "So I raised my godfather's .270 rifle and looked through the scope. When I saw how big he was I began to shake. My godfather told me to shoot when it got within 50 yards, so I did and the buck folded up and ran. I knew I hit him good, and me and my godfather high-fived and hugged each other."

Tim then took Brandon back to the truck to wait while he retrieved the buck.

"I sat there waiting to see how big he was. When he brought the buck out to the truck we both cried," Brandon said. "We took him to the weigh station where department officials told me they haven't seen one that big in a long time. Then we left to show off our trophy to the whole town. I could not stop smiling and I'm still smiling."

LDWF started the physically challenged hunting program in 2007 by building 19 wheelchair specific deer stands on five WMAs and a handful of wheelchair accessible duck blinds on four WMAs.

All physically challenged deer hunts are scheduled by reservation on a first come first serve basis by calling an LDWF district office. You can find numbers to each district office at *www.wlf.louisiana.gov*.

Wildlife and Fisheries Commission Names Replacements for 2009

The Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission voted unanimously to name Robert Samanie III the chairman of the commission for 2009 at their Jan. 8 meeting. Fred Miller of Shreveport was elected unanimously as vice-chairman.

Samanie, who resides in Houma, replaces the outgoing chairman, Patrick Morrow. During 2008, Samanie served as vice-chairman of the commission.

Samanie explained that he wants to represent people involved in the seafood industry, as well as recreational anglers and hunters. He feels that both sectors need regulations and enforcement based on biology, and that the two sectors need to understand that resources are shared between them.

Regarding his beliefs about the importance of Louisiana's natural resources, Samanie said, "These resources are important for employment and the culture and identities of local communities, whether the users of the resource are commercial or recreational. Management must be done in a way that guarantees future stocks, but in a logical and thoughtful manner."

Governor Bobby Jindal has appointed Ann Taylor to an at-large position on the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission.

Taylor, a Luling resident, is co-owner and marketing director of *Louisiana Sportsman* magazine, the state's largest periodical covering the outdoors of the Bayou State. A graduate of Louisiana State University, Taylor has worked in the outdoor news publishing business for 24 years and is a former president of the Louisiana Outdoor Writers Association.

Taylor's affiliations with conservation organizations include memberships in CCA Louisiana and the International Women's Fishing Association.

The Wildlife and Fisheries Commission was created to protect, conserve and replenish the natural resources and wildlife of the state, including all aquatic life. The commission sets all hunting, fishing and trapping seasons statewide, and establishes all regulations for the conservation of fish and wildlife and its habitat.

For more information, contact Bo Boehringer at 225-765-5115 or bboehringer@wlf.louisiana.gov

AGENTS OF *Change*

the evolving role of wildlife and fisheries enforcement agents

Wildlife Conflict Resolution Teams

By Lt. Col Keith LaCaze

A man walks out into the backyard of his home, which is located in a densely populated residential area. He focuses his sight on a tall pecan tree in the yard. As his eyes veer up towards the tree's high limbs, staring back at him is a full-grown adult male cougar.

One summer afternoon a group of kids go to a small lake near their neighborhood to enjoy a swim. A large alligator lurking in the lake attacks one of the boys. In the near fatal attack, the child loses his arm and is very lucky to survive.

During an ordinary winter morning a family is getting ready for work and school. Suddenly, a buck deer crashes through a window and enters the bedroom where one of the children is getting dressed. The shaken boy is fortunate to escape the room without injury.

"What?" you say. "Impossible!" But indeed, these are actual events that have taken place in sportsman's paradise within the last year. While such human and wildlife encounters are not common, they do occur. When wildlife nuisance incidents happen, an immediate and effective response is required from local law enforcement, emergency first responders and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF).

Responding effectively to any emergency situation requires proper planning and training. Dangerous encounters between people and wildlife create a unique emergency response because it requires the best and most appropriate resolution for both humans and wildlife.

In order to meet wildlife nuisance challenges, LDWF has established and trained Wildlife Resolution Teams (WRTs). The purpose of the teams are to ensure the best possible outcome for the wildlife and humans involved, with the optimal goal being no loss of life. WRT members are wildlife enforcement agents and wildlife biologists from around the state.

WRT members first met in January at LDWF's education center in Woodworth, La. At the initial meeting, members discussed and strategized operating procedures and protocols. The agents and biologists were divided into the regional units and various scenarios were presented. The units were tasked with crafting the appropriate responses for the nuisance scenarios in tabletop exercises. The tabletop discussions were followed with outdoor practice exercises, including administering animal sedatives and dart gun training.

In addition, the group discussed techniques in disseminating information to local officials and the news media. Wildlife nuisance occurrences not only require quick and safe resolution, but effective communication skills and a plan to keep the media and public informed. As such conflicts develop, these are key components for positive communication results that can deter unrealistic fears, concerns and rumors.

A successful outcome requires both the wildlife biologist and enforcement agent doing the job together, with each professional responsible for his field of expertise. The agent must respond to the initial call and arrive at the scene. He must verify the species, assess the situation and relay this information to other agents and biologists who are in route. With help from additional responding agents, he coordinates with local law enforcement to establish a public safety perimeter and manage vehicle traffic if necessary. An "action zone" manned and controlled by wildlife enforcement agents is also established, giving wildlife biologists the space to work with equipment and the animal. With this in place, the agents then confer with biologists to develop a plan of action for the particular situation.

The biologist must arrive at the scene with essential equipment such as capture gear, animal sedatives and transport enclosures. Upon arrival they evaluate the situation, condition of the animal, possible escape routes, courses of action and the best solution for the problem at hand. If the best option is to immobilize or otherwise capture the animal, they must then determine if relocation of the animal is the best choice.

No two wildlife nuisance conflicts are ever the same and while many situations require that we take action, some situations do not. Sometimes, the best solution is to simply do nothing. Given time and an escape route, most animals will return to their dwellings on their own accord. As stated earlier, the goal is no loss of life, and when a problem is resolved without injury or death to people and wildlife, we are winners all around.

Whether any other free ranging cougars are present in our state is a subject of much debate. But no one disputes the presence of bears, coyotes, bobcats and alligators in Louisiana. All are predators with the potential to conflict with humans or domestic animals. Even feral pigs and deer can be a potential threat to people.

Louisiana's abundant wildlife populations include a wide variety of beautiful and interesting species. They are part of our history and the stuff of legends and campfire stories, told to our children and handed down through generations.

Urbanization of wildlife habitats frequently results in human-wildlife encounters. It is our responsibility as wildlife enforcement and wildlife management professionals to respond effectively. Certainly, we as managers and protectors charged with stewardship of wildlife would feel some sense of failure if we did not fulfill the full scope of our duties as wildlife enforcement and management agents.

LA CUISINE
THE LOUISIANA KITCHEN

GREEK SHRIMP SCAMPI AND COCONUT CAKE

Recipe courtesy of Chef Holly Clegg from her Gulf Coast Favorites recipe book, which can be purchased on the Merchandise page. A portion of the proceeds is donated to the America's WETLAND Foundation.

Greek Shrimp Scampi
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 tablespoon minced garlic
1/3 cup chopped parsley
2 teaspoons dried oregano leaves
2 cups grape tomatoes, halved or 1 (28 oz) can diced tomatoes, drained
1 cup fat-free chicken broth
1 1/4 pounds medium peeled shrimp
4 cups fresh baby spinach
1 tablespoon pine nuts, toasted
1/4 cup crumbled reduced fat feta cheese

1. In a large nonstick skillet, heat olive oil, sauté garlic 30 seconds. Add parsley, oregano, tomatoes, broth.
2. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, simmer 10-12 minutes. Add shrimp, cook several minutes or until shrimp start to turn pink
3. Stir in spinach, continue cooking until spinach is wilted and shrimp are done, just a few minutes. Toss with pine nuts, sprinkle with feta cheese.

Coconut Cake
1 (18.25 oz) box yellow cake mix
1 egg
3 egg whites
1/4 cup canola oil
1 1/2 teaspoons coconut extract
1 cup nonfat sour cream
1/2 cup water
1/3 cup flaked coconut
Coconut Syrup (recipe below)
1(8 oz) container frozen fat-free whipped topping, thawed

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Coat a 13x9x2-inch pan coated with nonstick cooking spray.
2. In large mixing bowl, beat together all ingredients except coconut, whipped topping and coconut syrup until well mixed. Stir in coconut.
3. Pour batter into prepared pan. Bake 25-30 minutes, or until toothpick inserted comes out clean.
4. Remove from oven, punch holes in top of cake with fork. Pour coconut syrup evenly over top. Cool, spread with whipped topping.

Coconut Syrup
1 cup skim milk
1/2 cup sugar
1/3 cup flaked coconut

1. In small pot, combine milk, sugar and coconut, bring to a boil. Boil 5 minutes, stirring continuously. Pour over warm cake.

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WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
Children and nature
play well togethe
Be sure to expose your children to the outdoor